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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002850

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DEPT. FOR EUR/SE AND NEA/I

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TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV TU IZ US

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S ATTITUDE CHANGE; PRESSURE FOR MILITARY ACTION LESSENS

REF: A. ANKARA 2744

¶B. ANKARA 2807

¶C. ANKARA 2834

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROSS WILSON FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Since PM Erdogan's November 5 meeting with President Bush, pressure for immediate Turkish military action against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist camps has subsided. While both government and military leaders continue to stress Turkish readiness to carry out cross-border operations (CBO) to counter the PKK threat in northern Iraq, political and military leaders, including hard-line opposition figures, are also pointing to the need for Turkey to address longstanding complaints of the nation's ethnic Kurdish minority. Action by Government of Iraq and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) authorities to hinder PKK logistics and operations has also helped lower tensions. The refrain increasingly heard is that the fight against PKK terrorism cannot be won by military means alone. END SUMMARY

THREAT OF A CROSS BORDER OPERATION REMAINS

¶12. (C) The threat that Turkey will carry out a CBO remains real. Counter-insurgency operations in SE Turkey near the border with Iraq are ongoing. Turkish forces continue regularly to shell PKK positions near the border.

¶13. (C) Military response remains a policy option the GOT is ready to exercise. However, GOT officials have repeatedly sought to assure Iraqi and KRG officials that any CBO would be focused solely on the PKK terrorist threat in northern Iraq, would not target KRG officials or interests, and would seek to avoid civilian casualties through limited, targeted operations. Those assurances, USG involvement in providing PKK-focused intelligence, and a willingness of GOT and ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials to meet quietly

with Iraqi Kurdish political party and lower-level KRG representatives in recent weeks, appear from Turkey's vantage point to have eased somewhat the concerns of Iraqi Kurdish leaders that Turkish military action in Iraq would be focused more on them than on the PKK. Turkish media have reported statements attributed to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and KRG President Massoud Barzani that appear to accept that limited military strikes against the PKK by Turkey are inevitable and would not negatively impact Turkey's relations with Iraq or Iraqi Kurds.

¶4. (C) This increased level of mutual understanding and indications that KRG officials are taking steps to constrain the PKK in northern Iraq have led Turkey to put off threatened economic sanctions against KRG interests, further increasing prospects for direct GOT-KRG engagement. As President Gul commented, "We see that common sense has slowly started to dominate in northern Iraq." Perhaps in Turkey too. Military leaders, however, have expressed skepticism about the KRG's reported efforts to counter the PKK.

BUT PM/POTUS MEETING HELPS LESSEN PRESSURE

¶5. (C) GOT officials have portrayed the November 5 White House meeting between PM Erdogan and President Bush as having provided USG support for Turkish military action against the PKK (ref A). However, the meeting and consequent surge of U.S. support is helping to defuse the crisis we faced in October. Domestic political pressure on PM Erdogan's government to order Turkey's military to carry out such an operation has diminished. There is renewed focus on addressing the underlying Kurdish problems in Turkey.

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¶6. (C) PM Erdogan and other GOT officials increasingly emphasize the need for Turkey to address through political dialogue and economic development longstanding complaints of discrimination by its ethnic Kurds. Following the November 16 indictment of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) by Turkey's top prosecutor, who hopes to close down the party through judicial action (ref B), Erdogan responded by urging DTP members to conduct politics within the boundaries of Turkey's constitutional framework. Pointing to nationalist opposition efforts to push for the DTP's expulsion from parliament, Erdogan noted that if that segment of Turkey's Kurdish community remains politically isolated and is forced out of parliament, "you will drive them to the mountains."

¶7. (C) Erdogan told a gathering of AKP members November 24 that "democracy is the best weapon to combat terrorism and an atmosphere of freedom is the enemy of violence and terror." Turkey must isolate the terrorist organization and cut its social, logistic, financial, and psychological support. Much progress has been made in this effort, but there are many things yet to achieve. He also emphasized that if the final target of the fight against the PKK is to have it lay down its arms, such a goal cannot be achieved through "discriminatory means." Deputy PM and government spokesperson Cemil Cicek underscored that the state's emphasis should be on social policies to combat terrorism.

¶8. (C) Part of the AKP's strategy emanating from their November 24 meeting will involve Kurdish-origin members conducting lobbying efforts in the international arena, including in the United States and in European countries, to combat the PKK and DTP thesis that they alone speak for the majority of Turkey's Kurds. Given AKP's overwhelming electoral victory in the July parliamentary elections throughout the majority Kurdish southeast, they have a compelling story to tell.

¶ 9. (C) Deniz Baykal, the leader of Turkey's main political opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has contributed at the margins to the diminution of tensions through proposed policy approaches to the Kurdish issue that were surprisingly constructive (ref C). While Baykal's primary motivation may be to shore up his own shaky hold on party leadership, the end result may be to provide further political space for AKP to engage Turkish and Iraqi Kurds through political dialogue rather than the threat of violence.

¶ 10. (C) COMMENT: GOT leaders have demonstrated remarkable political fortitude by withstanding massive public and political opposition pressure to carry out retribution against PKK camps in northern Iraq. They have worked patiently to gain international support for Turkey's struggle with terrorism. PM Erdogan and his government can argue that they have begun to succeed in that effort. While one large mass-casualty attack by the PKK could yet upset GOT hopes that a large-scale military operation can be avoided, political leaders here are beginning to find it easier to speak more about a political approach to longstanding Kurdish complaints that underpin the armed struggle. Assuming harsh weather in the mountainous border region brings an end to PKK attacks in the southeast for the winter, as has normally been the case, the GOT will have a few months of relative quiet to press forward with constitutional reforms and other political tools that could lead to the elimination of those underlying causes.

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